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ABSTRACT

This paper examines government policies in Australia which encourage parent participation in disadvantaged schools in order to improve student literacy, and studies that have found that this policy may, in fact, increase inequality in education. The argument presented is that there are two types of parents--enthusiastic parents and those described as the silent majority. The first group will participate readily in a volunteer effort to assist their children by supportive activities at home and visits to the school to receive information and advice as well as participating in the school as volunteers. The second group may need more encouragement to visit the schools to receive the advice and assistance that would be helpful to their children and, as they do not receive this encouragement, are percieved negatively by the teachers. The following are some of the empirical findings supporting this theory: (1) Home visit programs were found more successful in involving parents than were programs where parents had to go to school; (2) parents having a high level of contact with the school were rated more positively by teachers with regard to their interest in furthering their children's education but independent ratings by interviewers found less disparity; (3) high contact parents were more likely to be Anglo-Australian, and more likely to apply advice obtained from the schools; (4) the contact level of the parents correlated positively with predictions about the children's reading competence scores; and (5) the differences found did not correspond to social class but rather to differences in family environment. Four pages of references are provided. (CG)

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HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONS AND INEQUALITY IN EDUCATION

by

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Paper presented at a Conference on Education and the Family (Provo, Utah, 4-6 February, 1986).

Home-School Relations and Inequality

in Education: Summary

This paper examines an unintended consequence of government policies which favour parental participation in disadvantaged schools in Australia and which seems to have a direct relevance to the U.S.A. The problem came to light in the operation of the La Trobe University Parents and Reading Project, which is concerned with involving parents of children in disadvantaged schools in their children's literacy development. These studies suggested the possibility that the normal operation of home-school relations may actually increase educational inequality and do little to diminish it. Two further studies were then conducted to examine this question directly. The argument is as follows:

The model of parental participation in schools preferred by most teachers is a "volunteer" model, in which either (a) parents are asked to support their children's education with activities in the home, but receive little information, advice or encouragement to help these activities, or (b) parents are invited to visit the school to receive information and advice concerning (a) or to participate in the school in some way, e.g., as "volunteers".

As a result, a division tends to develop between the "enthusiastic" parents who readily visit the school and the "silent majority" parents who do not. It is the former who enjoy the advantages of the favourable attitudes of teachers towards their families and the skill, knowledge and confidence development which can ensue from their visits to the school. Although the "silent majority" parents are often misperceived as being apathetic about their children's schooling, they are usually very interested but tend to be more in need of the advice and support of the school than are the "enthusiasts." The latter tend to be very positive about the program of home-school relations and this tends to reinforce its continuation.

There is a need for policies to support <u>both</u> the "enthusiasts" and the "silent majority" in disadvantaged schools.

The following of our empirical findings support the above argument:

1. Programs involving home visits were rather more successful in involving disadvantaged parents in their children's literacy development than were "volunteer" programs which required parents to visit the school to receive advice.

2. Teachers rated parents with a high level of contact with the school much more positively in the support they give to their children's

education, and the dispersion of these ratings was considerably smaller for the high contact group. Independent ratings made by trained interviewers did not reveal this difference in dispersion and did not show such a marked difference between the two groups.

3. Schools with a "volunteer" type of program showed a much larger dispersion in the teachers' ratings of parents than those without, a result not confirmed by the interviewers' ratings. The students' reading competence scores showed a similar difference in dispersion.

4. The high contact parents were more likely to be Anglo-Australians and more fluent in English; they provided a home environment more conducive to literacy development; they were more likely to improve their support for their child's literacy development as a result of the advice obtained from the school and they were more satisfied with the information obtained from the school about their child's schooling.

5. The level of contact of the parents with the school was positively predictive of the children's reading competence scores, controlling for SES and the general supportiveness of the home for the child's literacy development.

6. The differences in question were not, to any important extent, of social class. Rather, programs of Parent Participation are widening the arena in which differences in <u>family background</u> may have an influence.

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This paper is concerned with an unforeseen problem arising out of federal and state government policies of promoting parents' participation in their children's schooling in disadvantaged schools (and in schooling in general). The Schools Commission has sought to reduce the gap between the learning opportunities of disadvantaged and other children by increasing parental participation in the initiation and execution of projects in schools via the Disadvantaged Schools Program (Schools Commission, 1981) and most state administrations are also committed to increasing parental participation in schools, the most notable being Victoria (Fordham, 1983).

Within most disadvantaged schools there is a fairly wide range in the socio-economic status of families (Ross, 1984) and in their supportiveness for the child's school learning, as well as in the confidence with which parents approach the school, its teachers and its business. The model of home-school relations preferred by nearly all teachers is a 'volunteer' model. Either (a) parents are asked to assist the child's learning at home in some way, but are free to take part or not, and receive little advice, help, encouragement or monitoring of their efforts or (b) parents go along to the school to participate, e.g., to receive information and advice, to help as classroom aides, to help in the canteen, to attend School Council or Committee meetings. These contacts with school may provide the parents concerned to varying degrees with information and skill development which might benefit their children's learning at home. The parents who more readily visit the school are more likely to be those who feel more confident in doing so, possibly of higher socio-economic status and more confident in their role in assisting their children's learning at home. We already know that parents of this kind tend to provide more

support for their children's learning at home. There is also the possibility that those families whose parents visit the school regularly will be regarded more favorably by the teachers and that this may benefit the child's learning opportunities. It then seems that a 'volunteer' approach to home-school relations which requires the parent to visit the school, is likely to do little to reduce educational inequality and may well increase it.

This possibility first came to the author's attention while working in a project concerned with involving disadvantaged parents in their children's reading development (Toomey, 1984). The present paper will deal with the above issues by firstly describing the relevant parts of that project and secondly by reporting on two subsequent studies which examined the problem more deliberately.

But first it is necessary to draw a distinction between two strongly contrasting approaches to working with parents as a means of offsetting educational inequality - the "Family as Educator" and the "School Based Development" approaches. The first is based on the large body of research showing (a) that the family environment powerfully influences children's school learning and (b) that disadvantaged families are less likely to provide such educative environments (Walberg, 1984; Henderson, 1981; Hawley, et al., 1984; Scott-Jones, 1984). A major response to this work has been to attempt to influence parent-child relations in the home, either in the direction of fostering general cognitive development (e.g., Lombard, 1981; McCail, 1981; Gray and Klaus, 1965; Brown, 1975) or in the teaching and reinforcement of specific school learning (e.g., Tizard, et al., 1982; Russell, 1985; Amadeo and Scott, 1985). Several reviews have established how effective such approaches

can be (e.g., Clarke-Stewart and Apfel, 1978; Lazar and Darlington, 1982; Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Graue, et al., 1983). A much weaker version of this approach has been to improve home-school communication so that "...by involving parents, children may be helped" (Plowden, 1967: 43). The Plowden Report's "minimum program" specified: welcoming parents, meetings with teachers, open days, information for parents and reports for parents. (However, Epstein's (1984) work suggests that such activities will not lead to 'family as educator' kind of developments). Parents usually have to go to the school to take advantage of this information. In both versions of this approach the desirable learning outcomes are those determined by the educational professionals concerned.

The second approach has focussed on changing schools, rather than families, arguing that the latter approach is an example of "blaming the victim."

> "It is the Commission's view that the poor educational outcomes of students from low income groups cannot be explained in terms of factors such as lack of intelligence, lack of access to material resources, or some failure to acquire the "right" attitude to schooling. Rather, the problem most often stems from a situation where the attitudes and values of the group of which the students are members are in conflict with those which prevail in the schools they attent." (Australian Schools Commission, 1981, 160)

In Australia this has been most evident in the Disadvantaged Schools Program which specifically directs funds to schools as units of disadvantage, rather than individual families within schools (Ruby et al., 1985). It matters not that considerable numbers of advantaged children are to be found in disadvantaged schools (Ross, 1983), for the aim is to improve these schools as a whole by a policy of "organizational renewal," to use the Karmel Report's phrase, and by adjusting the curriculum of each school to the needs of the community it serves (Ruby , 1985; Hunt, 1975; Supplementary Grants Handbook, 1985). In this approach the parents participate by taking

part in the initiation, implementation and evaluation of programs intended to meet the needs of the school, rather than by subjecting their families to repairwork carried out by welfare-oriented professionals[1] This orientation is very strongly supported by the state school parent organizations (e.g., A.C.S.S.O., V.I.C.S.S.O., V.F.S.S P.C.), which distinguish between parent "participation" and "involvement", the former referring to participation in decision-making, the latter to their carrying out tasks determined by someone else, e.g., hearing reading (Beare, 1984). The school based approach has been much concerned with the implementation of parents' rights and their political education in this matter. This emphasis on democratic and participatory processes is part of official A.L.P. policy and is much lauded in the Victorian Ministerial Papers (Fordham, 1983) and in most of the Schools Commission's Special Purpose Programs (e.g., P.E.P.) (Schools Commission, 1981).

In spite of the support of official policy, it is very difficult to effect this participation in disadvantaged schools, as Malcolm's (1983) evaluation has recently shown. Moreover, the very nature of the work of decision-making bodies such as committees means that only a tiny minority of parents can be involved, even when success in participation is achieved. There have been notable successes and it is to be hoped that they will grow in number, but their justification lies in parental rights rather than in their contribution to student learning, which has yet to be demonstrated. A recent review by Hawley, et al. (1984: 118) cited five studies finding no relationship between parent's participating in decision-making processes and student achievement.[2]

In this matter the professional authority of teachers is a major obstacle to government policy, even when the teachers are themselves favourable towards parent participation. There is nevertheless a widespread and growing feeling that parental involvement is a "good thing" and parental interest is increasingly showing itself in more active involvement within schools, in which parents carry out aide-like work under the direction of teachers. These activities occur most frequently in the early stages of primary schooling, but even then nearly always involve only a minority of parents. Here we find a situation ripe for the discrimination between the families with high and low contact with the schools with which we are concerned. There is, however, an important exception to these developments. It is a widespread practice in Primary Schools to send home books regularly with the student for the parent or another family member to read with him or her, and this practice is becoming increasingly widespread in disadvantaged schools (Toomey, 1985). This makes it possible for those parents who cannot or choose not to visit the school regularly to be involved in their children's reading development, and, on the face of it, seems less likely to lead to the problem we are concerned with. This paper will therefore concentrate on that problem within the context of examining home reading programs, thus providing a more stringent test of the main hypothesis.

The initial research project in 1982 was concerned with involving parents in socio-economically depressed areas in their children's early reading development in the home (age group 4 to 6). The project was not principally concerned with testing the idea that these activities would help improve children's reading competence, because there is sufficient evidence to suggest that this is the case - from surveys (e.g., Toomey, 1980; Henderson, 1981; Scott-Jones, 1984; Hewison and Tizard, 1980), case studies (e.g., Teale, 1978; Durkin, 1966, 1984; Clark, 1976), experiments (e.g., Durkin, 1970;

Tizard, et al., 1982) and action research (e.g., Coulson, 1977; Millich, 1981). All the references cited above include evidence that many parents of lower socio-economic status (SES) help in their children's early reading development in the home without being formally asked to do so by their child's school. The project was intended to explore ways in which teachers in disadvantaged schools could both assist these parents and could also involve other parents more actively in their children's reading development, within the constraints of a normal school budget. At the practical level the idea appeared to have great potential. The powerful influence of children's home environments in their school learning has been amply demonstrated by much research. Reading is an activity recognised as important by nearly all parents (Mason, 1981). Most working class parents can read at a level beyond that of a young child, and the help can be given in the home in a convenient and readily accessible way, unimpaired by any sense of social distance from the school of the kind often felt by parents of lower SES Toomey, 1980).

The La Trobe Parents and Reading Project was begun in 1982 with pilot and exploratory work preparatory to a program in 1983. In 1982 it consisted of a network of teachers and their classes, some comprising teachers who were participants in the Senior Researcher's evening classes in Education. In 1982 pilot programs were conducted in the Year One classes of four state schools in the Disadvantaged Schools Program and three other schools. Interviews were also carried out with parents and teachers in the network.

A description of these pilot programs will be followed by a description of the main project in 1983.

The Pilot Programmes. The focus of the research is on parents assisting children's school learning, so the parental practices recommended should be in line with the child's teacher's approach. Fortunately, all the teachers in the project gave general support to the "psycholinguistic" approach, as

described in the document "This is Our Position on Reading" (Victorian Education Department Primary Languages Committee, 1982), which is founded on the views of Smith (1978), Goodman (1967) and Holdaway (1979). Suffice it to say that this theory is especially hospitable to parental participation, since it places great emphasis on the child's gaining meaning from print by an active, interpretive proces - it eschews a more technical approach in which children learn discrete items of knowledge divorced from naturally occurring meaning contexts, as with the teaching of pre-reading skills and phonic drills. The parental practices encouraged by this approach are easily carried out by most parents, e.g., reading regularly to children and discussing the reading matter with them, encouraging an enjoyment of reading, fostering oral language development, indicating and explaining environmental print, word games, encouraging children's writing and choosing books for their child appeal. Parents encountering children's reading errors would be encoraged to wait for the child to self-correct, get the child to complete the sentence and self-correct, give clues (including phonic clues) to reduce closure and give plenty of praise for success. Parental involvement in children's literacy development should be seen as an extension of normal parenting in fostering oral language development. Crucial in this is the positive influence of parents upon children's interest in an enjoyment of print materials.

Accordingly, in the pilot programmes we attempted to give very simple advice to parents about how they could help their children's reading development founded upon the above approach. We invited parents of Year One children to come to the school to receive information about helping with their children's reading. Books were sent home to all families, and a comparison was made

between families who came along to the school (the "participants") and the "non-participants". Interviews were conducted with a sample of participant and non-participant parents and changes in the children's knowledge of concepts about print were measured by using repeated measures of the Clay Concepts About Print (C.A.P.) Test (Clay, 1979), employing different forms of the test on each occasion.

Studies of this kind were carried out in the prep classes of three primary schools, two of them state schools in "disadvantaged" areas and one a Catholic parish school in a comfortably off area serving upper working class and lower middle class families. A comparison was also made between a Year One class in a high-fee independent school, with no program of parent involvement beyond sending books home and a Year One class of a state Primary School serving a middle class area, in which a program of active parent participation both in the classroom and at home was initiated, this involved extensive information giving and training sessions for parents, about half of whom helped in the classroom. In addition two home visiting programs were carried out, both in disadvantaged schools. Fourteen families of a bottom stream Prep Class in a school of high migrant recruitment were visited regularly by the child's teacher and by three helpers, their visits aiming to encourage parental assistance of the kind indicated above. Also fortnightly visits by trained teachers were made to the homes of twelve children who were to begin attendance at Harrison Primary School (a pseudonym) in 1983. Other projects were also carried out and interviews conducted with parents in the disadvantaged schools.

No significant differences emerged between the "participating" and "non-participating" families in changes in the students' knowledge about print.

But there was a correlation between the frequency of parents reading to the children and their C.A.P. scores. What became clear was that many of the "non-participating"families were reading regularly to their children. This is a finding quite in line with the earlier research of Hewison and Tizard (1980), which stimulated the Haringey project. That is, a lot of help is being given amongst families who do not have regular contact with the school. There is by now substantial evidence that many "disadvantaged" families give substantial support to their children's schooling at home (see above, also Toomey, 1980; Spaeth, 1976; Henderson, 1981). At the same time, there is evidence that the "Sociological Myth" of working class parents' incompetence in their children's education (Hargreaves, 1974) dies hard (Toomey, 1980). The home visits were particularly effective in arousing interest and participation by parents in the disadvantaged areas. In the disadvantaged school of high migrant density the teachers concerned faced a particularly difficult task. The students were from a bottom-stream group. There was a variety of ethnic backgrounds amongst them, and the interviews showed that these parents were, before the study began, rather less inclined to read to their children than others in the study. But as a result of the enthusiasm of the teacher and her helpers and their determination to succeed, thirteen out of the fourteen families participated actively, some after initial resistance. An important feature of the success of this program was that the children were used as "ambassadors". The teacher would tell them that she or one of the helpers, was to vitis the child at home, bringing books with them. In this program and in the home visits to pre-schoolers and their families, a crucial motivating force for the parents was the enjoyment and sense of anticipation of the children. The visits were looked forward to by the children and

and during them they displayed their pleasure in the reading activities. This was usually sufficient to encourage the parents themselves to play a part; the home visitors' role was to foster this parent participation. At the heart of the success with these families, is the loving, caring attitude of the parent towards the child, the child's enthusiasm for reading, motivated by the school and/or other factors, and the child's responsiveness to the parent. In cases in which the parent could not read English, an older sibling or other person was enlisted to help.

Contrast this situation with that at the independent school where, with little especial encouragement by the school the parents were actively involved in assisting their children's literacy development. Amongst the immigrant parents, hardly any played an active part in this way initially; no doubt partly because of language barriers, but also, probably because they felt this is not part of their role. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of those of the non-immigrant parents in disadvantaged areas who did not read to their children regularly. In most middle class families there is an expectation of this as normal behaviour. In disadvantaged areas one cannot take this for granted, so that a program of parent involvement in children's learning at home has to make much more active efforts to involve parents.

These considerations suggest the following typology of parents in disadvantaged schools:

Parents who help or are prepared to help in their children's reading

Parents readily visit the school	Yes	No
Yes	1	3
No	2	4

1. "Enthusiasts"
2. "Silent majority"
3. "Ambiguous"
4. "Uninvolved"

The experience of this project is that schools neglect the "Silent majority" for the "Enthusiasts".

The Main Project at Harrison Primary School

The lesson learnt from the pilot studies was to be wary of the "volunteer" approach, typical of most schools, whereby parents are invited to come along to the school to receive information. Taking the action to the parents by home visits appeared to be more effective.

Harrison Primary School is a severely disadvantaged school, as indicated by the Index of Disadvantage used in the Disadvantaged Schools Program - ranking amongst the bottom ten schools in the state. According to Disadvantaged Schools Consultants (Gannon, et al., 1981), it also has the additional disadvantaging characteristics of serving a very high proportion of Housing Commission residents and a low proportion of ethnic minority parents - an extra indication of disadvantage at the lower levels. It was selected partly because it had a history of poor home-school relations, which the new principal was keen to improve. This was done because a subsidiary aim of the project was to see if the parents' interest in the Parents and Reading project could be used to encourage their wider involvement and participation in the school.

One main comparison school, Smith Primary, was chosen. It has a low Index score, and serves a population of largely non-ethnic Housing Commission tenants. Wilson Primary was also chosen, it has a higher Index score, a low proportion of ethnic families and a good history of school-community relations. In all three schools, the Year One students were taught reading by a language experience approach. At Harrison and Wilson, interest based reading books and language experience books were sent home regularly.

Results from the Program at Harrison

The Harrison project was not a whole-hearted success. The aim was to support the parents' helping of their children by visits to the home, so that all the families could benefit. A subsidiary aim was to use these activities as a means of widening the parents' involvement in the education of their children. However, the home visiting program turned out to be not as extensive as had originally been envisaged. The choice of the particular person who became the aide in the program was a "political" one. She was a local woman, the school cleaner, with a child attending the school and was identified as an "active" parent (for example, she represented the school on the Disadvantaged Schools Area Committee). She was seen as knowing many local people and it was hoped that her appointment would bring these people more readily into the school. In brief, she was something of a power-broker in the incipient pattern of school-community relations which was beginning to develop at the school. She worked half-time in the program, but she had formerly helped in the school in her capacity as a parent, and some of these activities she wished to maintain.

In her work she experienced contradictory pressures. Firstly, the senior researcher saw the home visiting program as of major importance. Secondly, the aide was responsible on a day-to-day basis to the Infant co-ordinator who decided that the aide would be responsible for distributing the home reading books to the students. It was suggested that this task be taken up by the teachers, who agreed, but so neglected the distribution of the home reading books that the aide resumed this task, which she herself preferred. When, at a later date, a further attempt at change was made on this issue, the teachers said that the books would not be distributed regularly. Thirdly, the aide

helped in the school in the management of the parents-in-classroom activities, and in other matters, e.g., taking part in excursions. In some cases her work was a continuation or extension of work she had carried out voluntarily as a parent, and since she was only an aide half-time, the distinction between work she carried out as an aide and as a parent was difficult to draw. In fact, she preferred working in the school and initiated a number of activities in school which took her away from the home visits, e.g., a parent drop-in centre for the infants area. In this she was encouraged and supported by a Community Education Officer, newly appointed to this and one other school, who was keen to apply official policy in the direction of attracting parents into the school.

The aide thus experienced conflicting pressures and the line of least resistance, encouraged by her own preferences and the interests of those in daily contact with her, was to neglect the home visits and concentrate upon more teacher-like activities in the school. When questioned about the low level of home visiting, she claimed that the parents were often not at home when visited and she often expressed hostile and negative attitudes to parents in the area. For example, the low turnout of parents at public meetings to frame a policy on the newly constituted and reformed School Council drew a particularly vituperative condemnation from her of the parents in the area. This incident was particularly revealing in identifying an in-group of parents who defined themselves as especially active and "good" and who roundly condemned the local parents as lacking interest - this grouping was strongly reminiscent of the "respectable-rough" distinction made in British urban locality studies (Bell and Newby, 1971).

Just over half the parents received a visit during the year; hardly

any received more. Of those interviewed, all who helped in the school had received visits. On all the ratings made by the interviewer no differences emerged between the visitees and the rest. But the aide's ratings were much more favourable towards the visitees, as were the teachers', though not quite so strongly. The visitees differed in other ways. In their families the child was more likely to read to and to be read to by the mother rather than another family member. They were more likely to take a positive view of the school's efforts to inform the parents, they were much more likely to have received advice about helping in their child's education. Their children were more likely to read alone. These parents were more likely to be pleased to have taken part in the program and were more likely to be satisfied with the information they had received about the home reading program and the school curriculum. They were less likely than those who had not received a visit to want more information about their child's schooling.

Although they had been rated by the aide and the teacher as taking a more active part in the home reading program, a comparison between them and the non-visited parents (who did not help in the school) showed no important differences in their scores on various scales measuring support for reading development in the home. In other words, the ratings made by the aide and by the teachers were not borne out by the independent ratings made by the interviewer. The ratings of the parents made by the aide correlated positively with the teachers' ratings, though neither set of ratings correlated with those made by the interviewer. This suggests that processes of reputation forming within the school serve to accentuate the perceived differences between the "enthusiasts" who visit the school and the rest. Further, the fact of there

being an "in-group" can itself discourage others from coming to the school, as we picked up from comments in interviews.

The home visits, when carried out, were successful in conveying information to parents and breaking down a sense of distance from the school - the non-visited parents expressed strong wishes for more information. But the visits were much less successful than the program of regular visits carried out with the families of pre-schoolers. It was only parents who had also been in this program who said that the home visits had increased their sense of confidence in helping in their own children's education, their personal self-confidence and their confidence in dealing with the school.

What had happened was that the dynamics of "normal" home-school relations had converted a home-visit type of program into a "volunteer" type of program in which especial benefits, or at least a high profile, goes to those families with parents who regularly visit the school. This is illustrated by one of the success stories of the project centering on a small group of parents, friends of the aide, who used the parent drop-in centre. These parents produced, in response to the author's stimulus, a video-tape about the Infants area in the school to be shown to in-coming parents. The camera work was done by a media expert colleague, but the conception, design and content of the video was the work of the parents.

Given the current fashionability of parent participation, there is a strong temptation in evaluating such projects to point up these success stories from among the "enthusiastic" parents. These parents were in fact members of a small in-group unrepresentative of the parent body at large. But to display the results of their efforts around the traps of the parent organisations and Disadvantaged Schools Program could easily create the impression of a school with a highly successful home-school relations policy. Certainly the school's submission to the Disadvantaged Schools Program gives that impression.

One further finding alerted us to the problem of schools discriminating between high-contact and low-contact parents. At Smith, the Year One home reading program had a strongly volunteer character; the parents were free to borrow children's books from a library kept at the school, but no books were sent home with the children. Our analysis of the children's reading competence scores showed a significantly larger variance in scores at Smith compared with each of the other two schools (Toomey, 1984). There was also some evidence from the teachers' ratings of the Smith teachers distinguishing more strongly bewteen the high-contact and low-contact parents than the teachers at the other two schools (Toomey, 1984). Does a volunteer type program affect teachers' expectations to the advantage of the volunteer families, we were led to wonder:

Given the small size of the project and the post-hoc nature of these speculations, firm conclusions did not seem warranted but three important questions emerged with respect to the volunteer program typical of Victorian Primary schools:

1. Do teachers tend to view the high contact families especially favorably?
2. Are there any important differences between the high and low contact families?
3. Do the high-contact families benefit in their contacts in such a way as to improve their children's learning?

The 1984 Project

The focus of this project was on home reading programs in the Year One classes of disadvantaged schools, including only schools which regularly send home books for the parents to read with their children.

A number of Prep classes were studied from schools which had been involved in Parents and Reading In-Service Programs run by the author under V.I.S.E.C. auspices. School A had a very heavy program of parent in-service

at the Preps level of the "volunteer" variety. This involved a series of information-giving sessions, two of them all-day sessions and an extensive program of parental participation in classroom activities, focusing especially upon process-writing and literacy development. A full-time home-school liaison worker was employed in this program. Schools B and C each sent home books with the Prep. level children on a regular basis; in School B the teachers also gave parents advice about the help they could give their children at parent-teacher interviews. All three schools are Catholic parish primary schools defined as "dis-advantaged" schools and were multi-ethnic schools. In addition, from each of two other "disadvantaged" schools three parents having regular contact with the school and three with little contact were randomly selected for their families to be included in the study. The total number of families involved was 161, some 82 from School A. One hour interviews were conducted with the mother in each family, the students' competence was assessed using the (teacher administered) Sloane-Tuer Test of Early Literacy Development, and the teachers made ratings of the parents in the frequency and regularity of their hearing their child read or reading to their child and of the levels of interest and activity of the parents in their children's education. The schools also supplied information on the frequency and type of contact between the parent and the school.

The 1985 B.Ed. Study was carried out by practising teachers who were members of one of the author's classes for the B.Ed. Each of 28 B.Ed. students (all trained teachers) chose a primary school from which five families of grade 2 children were randomly selected (n=140); half the B.Ed. students chose 3 families having little contact with the school and 2 having some contact; the other half chose 2 with little and 3 with some contact. The A.C.E.R. Primary Reading Survey was administered to the grade 2 students, their teachers also rated their reading development, and each mother was inter-

viewed using the same interview schedule as in the 1984 study. Schools of varying socio-economic recruitment were represented in the sample. Unless stated otherwise, results reported subsequently are for the 1984 study.

Do the teachers view the high contact families especially favourably?

The answer is a firm and unequivocal "yes".

The teachers and the interviewers each rated each family on the regularity and frequency of reading episodes and on their levels of interest and activity in their children's education. The results show that the teachers rated the high contact parents much more favourably on all four scales, and that the dispersion of their ratings was significantly smaller for the high contact group (a difference of more than half a standard deviation); the teachers were especially disinclined to rate the high contact parents unfavourably. This difference in dispersion was not found in the interviewers' ratings on the same variables, though these ratings were more favourable to the high contact parents, but not to the same extent as the teachers', and not in the case of the frequency of reading episodes.

All the above findings appeared in both the 1984 and 1985 data.

Comparing School A (the "volunteer" school in the 1984 data) with Schools B and C showed a much wider dispersion in the teacher ratings at School A; a composite of all four ratings showed a standard deviation of .516 at School A and of .3356 at Schools B and C ($p=.0000$). Making the same comparison using the interviewers' ratings actually showed a larger dispersion at Schools B and C. This pattern was confirmed again and again taking each rating and each pair of schools separately. The teachers at School A differentiated rather more strongly in their minds between the parents they perceived as more and less committed.

School A also showed a significantly larger dispersion in the students'

reading competence scores, compared with the other two schools (the average was actually slightly lower at School A). At all three schools the children of the high contact parents scored higher on the average.

These findings have important implications. The literature on teachers' expectations shows that biased expectations of students on the part of teachers are most likely to have an influence on students' learning if the teacher knows little of the student, and that the student's "normal" pupil identity and naturalistic expectations by teachers set up strong barriers to ephemeral episodes of bias (Dusek, 1975; Braun, 1976; Good and Brophy, 1983). An important exception lies in the earlier stages of schooling when the student's pupil identity is being formed; a number of studies have successfully identified teacher expectation effects on students' learning at these early stages (Pedersen, et al., 1978; Risk, 1972; Crano and Mellon, 1978; Brandis and Bernstein, 1981; Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1976).

It seems likely that the favourable impression upon the teachers created by the high contact parents will pay off in benefits for the child's subsequent career (a follow-up study to examine this is planned).

We must then examine whether the teachers' perceptions are supported by detailed information from the parent interviews.

Are there important differences between the high-and low-contact families?

1. The high contact families were more likely to be of Anglo-background and non-Anglos among them tended to be more fluent in speaking and reading English. Nevertheless, a high proportion of the high contact parents were ethnic. There were no differences in socio-economic and educational background between the contact groups on the individual measures of these differences.
2. On a wide range of variables concerned with parents assisting children's reading development, there were no significant differences, e.g., frequency

of hearing reading and reading to the child, family membership of libraries, correction of the child's reading errors, the participation of other family members in reading sessions, reading activities in the pre-school phase.

3. However, the high contact parents were more likely to say they praised their children and were more likely to say their reading activities with the child had improved his reading competence and they were more likely to be assessed by the interviewers as having adjusted their practice in the light of the advice they had received. The interviewers were also more likely to say that the advice had been successful in their case.
4. The high contact parents were more likely to say they had received advice from the school, were more likely to approve of it, were more satisfied with the information they had received about their child's progress, about curriculum and about the school's activities,and they were almost all very pleased to have taken part in the program.
5. There is some evidence that the in-school information sessions and in-classroom activities were especially beneficial in improving parents' sense of confidence in helping their child's education and general development, and their understanding of their children's education. It is also clear that these in-school activities benefitted the general self confidence of some of the high contact parents (up to about a third); this result just fails to reach significance ($p=.08$).

Regarding the 1985 data:

1. All the above differences between high and low contact families found in the 1984 study were specifically confirmed.
2. In addition, the high contact families were differentiated from other families in that they were more likely to indicate the likelihood of their reporting two or more people reading to the child, the child talking about the text

during reading activities, the child's liking of reading, the effect of hearing reading on the child's enjoyment of reading, the child's reading alone, and the child's library membership. In addition, the interviewer was more likely to rate the high contact parents' children as being of higher reading competence.

The 1985 study sampled a much wider and more varied population, recruiting from high-fee independent schools and disadvantaged schools at the extremes and a representation of the range between. This may account for the fact that the high contact families were more strongly differentiated in some of the reading-support variables. However, there were many such variables which did not discriminate them in either study. Also, the only socio-economic variables to discriminate them was the mother's educational level - and this rather weakly ($p = .04$).

Do the high contact parents learn things at school which help in their children's education?

It is important to find out whether the high contact parents learn things at the school which influence their own practice and their children's learning, over and above the general supportiveness of the family environments provided.

Certainly at the subjective level there is very strong support for the benefits of this work. In both the 1984 and 1985 studies over 80 percent of parents claimed the home reading activities to have benefitted both the child's reading competence and enjoyment of reading. The interviewers' ratings confirmed these results.

These strong positive feelings were confirmed by school A's own evaluation

of the 1984 Year One home-reading program among the 20 or so high contact parents; they also appear in an evaluation of the "SHARE" home-reading program in the Doveton cluster of schools (Turner, Wright and Nixon, 1985); in the "SHARE" evaluation, teachers' evaluative comments were equally positive.

Gray (1975) in a review of British programs of compensatory education found that strongly positive comments of this kind were often not matched by findings to do with students' learning gains, so we must treat these results cautiously. Also, they do not throw light on the high contact families as a separate group.

To pursue this question a number of scales were developed from the detailed information gained in the parent interviews. These were:

Socio-economic status (SES) Father's mother's education and occupation; ethnicity.

Home resources for reading competence - a 34 item scale indicating the general supportiveness of the family environment for literacy development. This scale was not intended to tap the extent to which the parents used pedagogically sophisticated techniques of the kind recommended by reading specialists and the teachers in this study, but it did err on the side of inclusiveness. Examples of items included are: frequency and regularity of reading episodes, parents' levels of interest and activity in the child's education, availability of books and library membership.

Parents' deliberate reading support strategies - This scale refers to an awareness of and the practice of the kinds of reading support activities recommended by teachers and reading specialists. They refer to such matters as prompting and pausing in response to the child's mistakes in reading aloud, the use of praise and the parents' awareness of the advice given at the school.

Amount of parents' contact with the school - a composite based on information from the teachers and the interviewers, referring to the frequency

of contact with the school and participation in information sessions, helping in the classroom and other kinds of contact (e.g., membership of committees, the School Council and working in the school canteen).

Parents' contact with the school - a single variable based on information from teachers and parents.

Influence of the reading episodes on the child's reading competence - this scale was based on the parents' and interviewers' subjective estimates.

Influence of the reading episodes on the child's enjoyment of reading - as for the last-mentioned scale.

There is some doubt whether the last two scales are independent of the child's reading competence. It would be easy for a parent to mistake the normal growth in the child's reading competence and enjoyment (much influenced by schooling) as the product of the regular reading episodes. This will be taken into account in the subsequent analysis.

In both the 1984 and 1985 data the high contact parents compared favorably on all these scales, with the exception of SES in the 1985 data. It is important, though, not to exaggerate these differences, especially those of SES. The majority of the individual items making up these scales do not show significant differences between the contact groups, even though the scale scores do. What is more important is their bearing on the child's reading development.

To examine the causal effect of this differentiation, a series of stepwise multiple regression analyses will be conducted with the students' reading competence scores as the dependent variables; these will examine whether the amount of contact with the school and the parents' use and awareness of pedagogically more sophisticated strategies of literacy support influence the child's

reading competence, over and above the influence of the family environment as reflected in the scales indicating SES and home resources for reading competence. It is not enough to show that the children of the high contact parents are more competent readers, as this may be the result of home factors not caused by contact with the school.

A further analysis will examine the connection of the home reading activities' influence on the child's reading competencies and enjoyment and the child's reading scores, net of all the variables mentioned above.

Tables 1 and 2 show the amount of variation in the children's reading competencies which is predicted by the variables on each successive line, net of that predicted by those on all the preceding lines.

TABLE 1: Stepwise multiple regression analysis of reading scores: 1984 data (year one level)

Blocks of Predictors	Dependent Variables 1. Reading - Self Concept: % variation predicted	Cumulative %	2. Reading Competence: % variation predicted	Cumulative %	1 + 2: % variation predicted	Cumulative %
SES and Home Resources for Reading Competence	7.11	7.11	1.37	1.37	0.80	0.80
Deliberate Strategies for Teaching Reading at Home	.11	7.22	0.01	1.38	0.01	.81
Parents' Amount of Contact with School	8.73	15.95	5.63	7.01	10.00	10.81
Estimated Influence on Child's reading Competence and Enjoyment	6.96	22.91	17.12	22.76	21.37	32.18

TABLE 2: Stepwise multiple regression analysis of reading scores: 1985 data (year three level)

1985 data: (Year Three level)

Dependent Variables

Blocks of Predictors	Word Knowledge		Comprehension		Teacher's Assessment	
	% variation predicted	Cumulative	Variation predicted	Cumulative	% variation predicted	cum
SES and Resources for reading competence	4.34	4.34	6.33	6.33	5.82	5.8
Deliberate Strategies for Teaching Reading at Home	0.00	4.34	0.02	6.34	4.27	10.0
Parents' Amount of Contact with the School	3.60	7.94	17.35	11.01	5.74	15.8
Estimated Influence of Child's Reading Competence and Enjoyment	21.57	29.51	15.14	26.15	29.12	39.9

* Moderated by the Teacher's assessment of the average level of competence of the school at that grade level, compared with others in the state.

The results show a consistent influence of SES and home resources for reading competence on the child's reading competence, as so much previous research indicates. After this has been taken into account, there appears to be little influence of the parents' adopting pedagogically more sophisticated techniques of helping reading development[3] (except in the case of teacher assessed reading development in the 1985 data; this effect was much reduced if these assessments were not moderated according to the average level of reading competence in the school, as estimated by the teacher; i.e., it appears to be in part a school effect or school recruitment effect).

However, the parents' amount of contact with the school appeared to have a notable influence beyond that of SES and home resources for reading competence. This demonstrates something important - that the "volunteer" approach yields advantages for the children of the high contact parents. It could be argued that the statistical controls for the general supportiveness of the family environment do not adequately reflect the intensity of the parents' interest as reflected in the level of contact with the school. Even if that were true, though, it would still mean that the help is going to the families which least need it. One factor which causes frequent parental visits in some cases is the child being of a low level of competence. That relationship would tend to mask the results found here. A subsequent follow-up study will provide a more rigorous test of the causal processes involved.

Finally, the estimated influence of the home-reading activities on the child's reading competence does indicate a substantial effect, net of substantial controls for the family environment and level of contact with the school. This does suggest the value of home-reading programs, but the result is subject to objections made above.

It is of some interest that the parents' practice and awareness of the teacher-approved methods of assisting literacy development showed little effect. What appears more important are the opportunities to learn in the home (Walberg, 1984) in terms of access to books and to adults and other family members who will read with the child.

The psycho-linguistic approach to learning to read is currently especially fashionable. It is understandable that the professional pedagogue imbued with these ideas should wish to bring enlightenment to parents. But the Mangere Project has demonstrated how time-consuming it is to train parents to make the "correct" response (McNaughton, et al., 1981) whereas the Haringey project (Tizard, et al., 1982) was very successful without conveying any particular approach to reading support by parents as the "correct" one. The value of such information sessions without detailed follow-up may be illusory. They do, however, evoke much praise from parents and are clearly good for smooth home-school relations (Tizard, Mortimer and Burchell, 1981).

There was some suggestion in the results that parents helping in the classroom was especially beneficial for developing the parents' competence, understanding and self-confidence, and this may be an important source of the benefits for the high contact families.

Conclusion

It is clear that the parents who often go into the school to take part in its activities of various kinds differ from those who do not. They are more likely to help their children's reading development at home in a manner consistent with modern reading theory. They are more likely to offer the kind of

family environment strongly supportive of their children's reading development in general, as distinct from any deliberate attempts the parents might make as the result of advice from the school. They are slightly more likely to be of higher socioeconomic status and to be Anglo-Australians; if they are from ethnic minorities they are more likely to be more fluent in speaking and reading English. It should be emphasised, though, that the SES and ethnic differences are not great. We are dealing with disadvantaged schools, in which those parents who often visit the school are of higher social status, on the average, but this does not mean that they are distinctively middle class in background. Generally speaking, levels of education are rather humble, and the schools are marked by an absence of parents from the professional classes.

Further, it is clear that these enthusiastic parents are well satisfied with the information they receive from the schools. They are high in their praise of the school's efforts to inform them and they are likely to claim that considerable benefits are flowing to their children's education as a result of these contacts. A minority also see benefits as flowing to themselves as well.

In addition, these families are likely to be viewed in an especially favourable light by teachers. As indicated above, there are grounds for thinking that this may influence the students' learning opportunities still further. A subsequent follow-up study will be carried out to see if this is so.

Here we have another example of the "Mathew effect" - "to be that hath shall be given". The families which are especially supportive in the general resources for reading development which they afford their children are also

those more likely to be able to take advantage of the school's program of home-school relations.

Policy Implications

We have long known of the educational advantages available to the children from family environments which are supportive of scholastic success, which also tend to be accompanied by economic advantage. The opening up of schools to parental participation and involvement has, it seems, widened the arena in which those processes may occur. It is ironic that the A.L.P.'s education policy which gives such emphasis to parental participation in schools is also committed to equality of educational outcomes and to positive discrimination in favour of the disadvantaged. The plain truth is that the Victorian government's policy is under-resourced. There are few or no instances in which the state government's needs based staffing formula for disadvantaged schools is used to support parents as educators of their own children. The government has set up a "special" School Council Support Unit and in each region a School Council liaison worker to support parental participation in decision-making on School Councils, but has devoted no resources to supporting parents as educators of their own children. There are federally supplied resources which could be used towards these ends e.g., funds of the Supplementary Grants Program, M.A.C.M.E. and the Participation and Equity Program, but the orientation of teachers is overwhelmingly towards using available resources within schools. So strong is this tendency in the Supplementary Grants Program that the governing committee has ruled that no more than sixty percent of available funds may be used to fund teacher's aides. Malcolm's (1983) evluation of this program has demonstrated that the bulk of the available funds goes to support the work of teachers in classrooms

or on excursions and camps.

It would be unrealistic and unfair to discourage schools from making information and advice available to the "enthusiasts" and from making use of their labour in support of the school's program.

What is needed, however, is a devotion of greater resources to reaching the "silent majority". The SHARE home reading program in the Doveton Cluster of schools has a firm basis in home visits. Initial visits are carried out by teachers accompanied by a home-school liaison worker; subsequent visits are carried out by the teachers alone. Teachers receive time release for their work.

The SHARE program has been extremely successful in reaching all families, not just the enthusiasts (Turner, Wright, and Nixon, 1985), though results have yet to be published on the effects on children's learning. The SHARE program has given a lead. Above all, we have to avoid the tunnel vision which sees only schools as the site of legitimate school learning and we need to target available resources to supporting the families' efforts of those who need it most--students of below average ability whose parents do not feel confident in assisting their learning at home. A high priority must go to non-routine communication with parents (Epstein, 1984), phone calls, notes, interpreters, personal visits by teachers to these parents to ask them to help at home; peripatetic advisers with the requisite human relations skills to encourage and help sustain parental efforts; resources to make available baby sitting facilities for the low resource parent under pressure of multiple time demands. We need to get to parents through television and radio, the community language press, the churches, the workplace, the social club, the library and the local video loan club. We need to use these avenues to give parents a whole range

of kinds of advice: on how to handle parent-teacher interviews, how to help with homework activities, how to support the child's self-esteem and his or her role as a student, how to develop and sustain literacy and numeracy skills in their children, how to understand the workings of the system of schooling and to manage their relations with it. Examples of how to do many of these kinds of things are already available. But simply exhorting teachers to do more to involve parents without supplying any extra resources will only lead to the "volunteer" approach which places lower demands upon teachers.

More resources are needed, but it is clear that these resources should not be solely under the control of teachers, or they will most likely be used only to support in-school activities, as the experience of the Supplementary Grants Program has shown. Experiments need to be conducted in alternative forms of delivering these services, e.g., via the Community Education officers or through special units such as the now defunct M.I.C.K. Project.

We must ensure that resources to support the family as educator go to those families which need it most.

NOTES

1.The'effective school's ' movement in the U.S.A. is attempting to improve the achievements of disadvantaged schools by changing within - school processes , but the focus is on instructional rather than decision - making processes.Ron Edmonds, a major originator of the movement, specifically excluded parents from his model.However the Institute for Responsive Education has recently mounted a strong case for the inclusion of parent activities in effective schools processes (Zerchykov,1985)

2.The Institute of Responsive Education's review (Zerchykov,1985) identified only one study showing a positive relationship.However,this review identified a range of within-school processes involving parents which influence student's school achievement,especially using parents in teaching roles in school and home.

3.It is emphasised that only a narrow range of practices was examined.

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